

Loss of Innocence

by Becca Martinson

Before I became a parent - during my long years of wanting to be a parent - I insisted I knew what it would be like to be a parent. My sister, in what felt to me like an affront to my infertility, repeatedly told me that I couldn't know.

Well, I was partially right. I had done a pretty good job of imagining the day-to-day turmoil and wonder a full-time child brings to one's life. As for the rest of it - it's not that I didn't imagine it, it's that I couldn't possibly have imagined it. I had no idea of my own capacity for love and compassion (and worry). One of my favorite columnists wrote something to the effect that compared to what one feels for one's child, the deepest relationship one has with an adult is like a drunken shout across the room. This is certainly true for me.

And so it is that I've come to face issues of race and difference from an entirely new perspective. Having been a White woman married to a Black man, I thought I'd been through the transracial experience before. I had grown accustomed to the occasional looks or questions and had been through worrying times with my (ex-)husband when (for example) Neo-Nazis marched in Chicago. I had spent a lot of time as part of a Black family and had learned, firsthand, that I would never know what it felt like to grow up Black in this country.

Doing a transracial adoption of a Black child was barely a question for me. During my marriage I'd envisioned having Black or biracial children, and the vision never went away. I adopted as a single parent, and my daughter is the child of my dreams. When I look at her I don't see color, I see only my child. This is as I expected it to be. What I hadn't anticipated was how completely I'd experience the world through her eyes.

At the age of not-quite-three, my daughter knows that she has brown skin and that mine is pink, but she doesn't yet see us as different from each other. She knows that her friends have fathers but hasn't noticed as yet that she doesn't. She has frequently heard the word adoption and celebrates her

"adoption day," but doesn't yet know that this word has no application in her friends' lives.

All of this is about to change.

I notice it most in kids about four years of age. They're the ones who ask, "You're her mother?" "Is she Indian?" "How comes her lips are so big?" They're curious, they haven't yet learned to censor themselves, and they're very aware of difference.

With my daughter still innocent of their queries, I've had the opportunity to practice my responses. I always try to react matter-of-factly, acknowledging that there is a difference but that everyone has differences in their lives and we can, in fact, celebrate difference. "Yes, her lips are bigger than yours. I have small lips, you have medium lips, and she has big lips. But we all have lips!"

I'm comforted by my daughter's innocence and mourn the fact that she's about to lose it. It breaks my heart that she will one day realize, as I did, that the woman in the dollhouse store started following us around only after she noticed that my daughter is African American. It breaks my heart to know that she will one day become aware of all of the ways in which she's "different." It especially breaks my heart to know that, at least some of the time, all of this will break her heart.

I sometimes wish that I could stop time, that she could remain innocent forever. This, of course, is not possible. Nor would I really want it to be.

But it's hard. This is the part of parenthood I didn't expect. This is my loss of innocence.

Becca Martinson is a former editor of Pact Press.